

# The Mont Saint-Michel manuscripts through the ages



By [Marie Lebert](#), version of 23 October 2017.

- \* [Introduction](#)
- \* [From Mont Saint-Michel to Avranches](#)
- \* [The manuscripts produced at Mont Saint-Michel](#)
- \* [The themes of the manuscripts](#)
- \* [The scripts of the manuscripts](#)
- \* [The illuminations of the manuscripts](#)
- \* [The manuscripts over time](#)
- \* [The Scriptorial of Avranches](#)
- \* [The Rare Book Library](#)
- \* [Some recent publications](#)
- \* [The manuscripts at the digital age](#)

\* [The Virtual Mont Saint-Michel Library](#)

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[\[Web version\]](#)

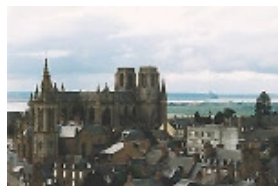
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[\[Short version as an album with pictures\]](#)

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## Introduction



Avranches, a city of 8,000 inhabitants, is located in Normandy, a few miles from Mont Saint-Michel, a medieval abbey surrounded by sea or sand strands that can be deadly.

The Rare Book Library of Avranches includes a priceless treasure, the 199 surviving manuscripts from the Mont Saint-Michel Abbey, the oldest of which dates back to the eighth century, and the more recent from the fourteenth century. Of these 199 manuscripts, seventy manuscripts were produced in the Mont Saint-Michel Scriptorium. The other manuscripts were produced in secular scriptoria located in Paris, in Île-de-France (the region around Paris) and in Italy. These manuscripts, one of the finest French collections from the Romanesque period, have had [their own museum](#) since 2006, as well as [their own virtual library](#) (select “Avranches”).

Here is a virtual journey through the ages, from the 8th century to the early 21st century. As a librarian, researcher and writer, I find some resonance in the beautiful lines written by Monique Dosdat, a well known scholar for her work on these manuscripts: “The artists seek inspiration from the achievements of previous centuries, after absorbing what they could see in a manuscript they borrowed, or read in an abbey they visited (...). Nevertheless imitation is not servile, and

everyone brings his own style together with his expertise.” In my case, past achievements are the books by Monique Dosdat, former curator of the Heritage Fund at the City Library of Caen, and by Jean-Luc Leservoisier, former curator of the Rare Book Library of Avranches. I have tried to convey my own feelings while being inspired by their writings.

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## From Mont Saint-Michel to Avranches



The Mont Saint-Michel Abbey started creating a library of manuscripts in the late tenth century, under the impulse of the Benedictine monks who settled there in 966, with Abbot Maynard as their prior. Later on, they also started gathering a few printed books. The library — a large one by the standards of the time — was reorganized in the seventeenth century by the Maurists (monks from the religious congregation of Saint-Maur), who settled in Mont Saint-Michel in 1622 to replace the failing Benedictine community. The Maurists wrote a catalogue and added the bookplate “Ex monasterio Sancti Michaelis in periculo maris” (From the monastery of St.

Michael at the peril of the sea) on the first page of each volume, as a (better) equivalent to our modern stamping.

How did the Mont Saint-Michel Library end up in Avranches, several miles away, on the mainland? During the French Revolution, the State confiscated all the libraries of the clergy and the nobility to start public funds, ancestors of our public libraries. The revolutionary authorities requested the 3,550 books of the library (including the 299 manuscripts) to be moved to Avranches, the main city of the department — a new territorial unit that had just been created. In 1791, under the supervision of the National Guard, the books painfully journeyed in carts through the sand strands of the bay in order to be transferred on the mainland. Since then, the library has resided in Avranches, first in a damp hall for sixty years with other confiscated church funds, and then in a beautiful hall built in 1850 for the Heritage Fund on the second floor of the brand new City Hall. This has not changed since then. The manuscripts and the printed books are still housed in the same hall in 2017. As a State Heritage, they belong to the French State while being under the custody of the City of Avranches.

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## The manuscripts produced at Mont Saint-Michel



The history of these manuscripts is closely linked to the history of the Mont Saint-Michel Abbey. Surrounded by the sea, two neighbouring rocks were named Tumba (the Latin name for “mount”), which would become Mont Saint-Michel, and Tumbellana (the Latin name for “mound”), which would become Tombelaine. According to a legend related in the ninth-century manuscript *Revelatio*, St. Michael appeared during the sleep of Aubert, Bishop of Avranches, ordering him to build a church on Mount Tumba, and appeared to him twice more during his

sleep before Aubert took action. The first oratory was founded in 708, with a community of twelve clerics. Now enshrined in the Church St. Gervais of Avranches, Aubert’s skull has a hole left by St. Michael’s finger when the archangel started to get angry, for his orders to be fulfilled without any delay. This legend still rings true to these days (except for some physicians).

A second manuscript, *Introductio Monachorum*, tells the story of Aubert’s clerics being replaced by Benedictine monks in the Mont Saint-Michel Abbey. In 966, the Duke of Normandy Richard I sent off a Benedictine community under the supervision of Abbot Maynard, who became the first abbot to create a scriptorium and a library. After the relics of saints and the sacred bows, the library — that is to say a few books in a cabinet — was the greatest treasure of an

abbey. The scriptorium gave birth to thirteen manuscripts, copied from manuscripts lent by other abbeys in order to create new manuscripts for worship and study. The interlibrary loan is nothing new. It already existed in medieval times.

The scriptorium produced seventy manuscripts, most of them between the late tenth century and the twelfth century, with a flourishing period in the eleventh century, particularly between 1050 and 1080, when William the Conqueror, Duke of Normandy, brought peace and prosperity to the Anglo-Norman Kingdom. Britain had become part of Normandy after the Battle of Hastings in 1066. (Normandy would become French only in 1204.) Thirty-three manuscripts were produced between 1050 and 1080.

The Saint-Michel scriptorium became one of the most productive monastic scriptoria in Europe. Fifteen scribes transcribed thousands of pages in silence, in perseverance and in prayer, with extreme care to their work, and with a constant search for perfection and harmony. The illuminations were added then, often by the scribes themselves, with illuminated initials and full-page paintings.

The scriptorium created its own style, with original creations. The interaction between images and texts was so dense that specialists now talk about “illuminated script”. Adorned with scrollwork and foliage, illuminated initials had a simple design, which would become a specific style of Romanesque illuminations in Europe.

Despite being secluded in the monastery, scribes were not entirely cut off from the world. The Mont Saint-Michel Abbey actively participated in exchanges of manuscripts, of scribes and of artistic influences. These exchanges were common in Benedictine abbeys. With visitors coming from all over Europe, the scribes of the Mont Saint-Michel Abbey got acquainted with Nordic, Byzantine and Carolingian traditions. The scriptorium developed close relations with the scriptorium of the Abbey of Winchester in England, and with the scriptorium of the Abbey of Fécamp in Normandy. The manuscripts themselves — which were then lent to other abbeys, for their own scribes to copy them for their own library — contributed to the spreading of the currents of thought and science of their time.

After its heyday in the eleventh century, the Mont Saint-Michel Scriptorium experienced a downturn during the first half of the twelfth century, a period marked by political instability, before its revival under Robert of Torigni, who has the Abbot of Mont Saint-Michel during thirty-two years (1154-86). An outstanding builder, Robert of Torigni — often surnamed “Robert du Mont” (Robert of the Mount) in French — built new constructions, including two towers, with one of them assigned to the library. According to the tradition, the library included 140 books — an enormous figure at the time — and the abbey received the beautiful name of “City of Books”, long before Paris became the European capital of publishing.



Only a dozen manuscripts produced by the scriptorium have survived the test of time. The most famous one is the *Cartulaire du Mont Saint-Michel* (Ms 210), a collection of the property titles of the abbey, produced from 1154 to 1158 with many illuminated initials and some full-page drawings. The cartulary was then continued for three centuries to transcribe the charters of the new properties of the abbey, but without the beautiful script and the rich ornamentation of the twelfth-century work. After the cartulary was restored in the early 2000s, a beautiful facsimile was published in 2005 by the association Les Amis du Mont Saint-Michel (The Friends of Mont Saint-Michel).

After Normandy was annexed to France in 1204, its monastic scriptoria started declining, and went on declining even more during the turmoils of the Black Death (1346-53) and the Hundred Years' War (1337-1453). Ten manuscripts only — mainly liturgical works — were produced at Mont Saint-Michel from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century. Moreover, new scriptoria were created in main cities and not in abbeys any more. On the one hundred manuscripts from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries now housed in the Rare Book Library of Avranches, most of them were produced in secular scriptoria in Paris and in Île-de-France. Some manuscripts were also produced in Italy, for example *Decretales*, a canon law collection produced in a secular scriptorium in Padua. The Mont Saint-Michel Scriptorium stopped production in the early sixteenth century.

On the 199 manuscripts from the Mont Saint-Michel Library still existing in Avranches, seventy manuscripts were produced at Mont Saint-Michel, and 129 manuscripts were produced elsewhere. On the same 199 manuscripts, three manuscripts were produced in the eighth century, thirty-six manuscripts were produced from the tenth to the twelfth century, and ninety manuscripts were produced from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century.

The centrepiece of the collection for the Gothic period is a 1,200-page Bible produced from 1210 to 1215 in a secular scriptorium in Paris or in its surroundings. Composed of two volumes — the Old Testament (Ms 1) and the New Testament (Ms 2) —, the Gothic Bible was transcribed by a single scribe. The eighty-four historiated initials on a gold-leaf background are the work of two or more artists. This manuscript and others contributed to the reputation of Paris as the “City of books” in Europe.

Ironically, the two most beautiful manuscripts produced by the Mont Saint-Michel Scriptorium — a Sacramentary from the eleventh century, and a Romanesque Bible — do not belong to the Rare Book Library of Avranches. The Sacramentary is the property of the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York. The Romanesque Bible is the property of the City Library of Bordeaux, a city in southwestern France. The one-volume Bible includes dozens of historiated illuminated initials.

Fifteen manuscripts — complete or fragmentary — produced at Mont Saint-Michel were also dispersed around the world, for example a fragment of some *Évangiles* (Gospels) from the eighth century in St. Petersburg, a few manuscripts in the French National Library in Paris, and other manuscripts in Rouen (Normandy), in Leiden (Netherlands), in London and in the Vatican.

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## The themes of the manuscripts



The Mont Saint-Michel manuscripts are both sacred texts and works of liberal arts and profane science. The many sacred texts are the Holy Scripture and its commentaries, works by the Church Fathers, and liturgical books. All these books were essential to the life of a Benedictine community punctuated by prayer, by meditation and by religious services several times a day.

The manuscripts collection holds few copies of the Bible — either the complete Bible or one of its Books — but it holds over fifty glosses and commentaries on the Old and New Testaments, most of them dating from the thirteenth century and free from any ornamentation.

Eighty manuscripts are the main works written by the Church Fathers, who were the authoritative interpreters of the Christian tradition between the first and the fifth centuries. These works were then copied tirelessly in the following centuries, as evidenced by the twenty-seven manuscripts written by or about St. Augustine, the ten manuscripts by St. Gregory, St. Jerome and St. Ambrose, and the eight manuscripts by Origen, the father of the Greek Church.

The liturgical books are sermons and lives of saints, as well as anthologies and “mélanges”, since the same manuscript often includes several works bound together.



The Mont Saint-Michel Library was open to the currents of thought and science of its time, and the manuscripts were used for dissemination of knowledge among the monks. Thus liberal arts and profane sciences are also represented, with historical books and chronicles, the main works of Antiquity and the Middle Ages, treatises of canon, treatises of Roman civil law, and treatises of astronomy, medicine and computation (calculation of the liturgical time). Antique texts are works

by Plato and Cicero, treatises by Seneca and Boethius, and thirty-one treatises by Aristotle grouped in nine bound manuscripts, meaning as many books for Aristotle as for St. Augustine. Works from the Middle Ages include three treatises by Peter Abelard.

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## The scripts of the manuscripts



The scribes working in scriptoria first used the Roman majuscule, before using the uncial majuscule and then the Caroline minuscule. The oldest manuscript of the Rare Book Library of Avranches, which dates from the eighth century and was not produced at Mont Saint-Michel, was written using the uncial majuscule. The early Carolingian script was intended for ceremonial books, with letters using round forms, instead of the angular Roman majuscule. The uncial majuscule used at Mont Saint-Michel had a round pattern inspired from the Insular Irish tradition.

The Roman majuscule and the uncial majuscule were then replaced with the Caroline minuscule, a smaller script created at the time of Charlemagne to revive the tradition of clarity and readability of classical Antiquity. The Caroline minuscule gradually supplanted other scripts in charters and books. In the late tenth century, when the Mont Saint-Michel Scriptorium was created, the Caroline minuscule had a less round, higher and more angular shape. Only the titles and the first words of a text were still written in Roman and uncial capitals, often with a coloured ink.

With the exception of a Treatise by St. Ambrose in three volumes (Ms 63-65) produced in the fifteenth century on paper, the Mont Saint-Michel manuscripts were transcribed on parchment, made from sheepskin for most of them or made of goatskin scraped or dried under tension. They were also transcribed on vellum (from the Old French word “vélin”), made from calfskin and considered a finer-quality material. The black ink was made from a black pigment such as charred wood or carbon black, with a binder such as honey or Arabic gum. Colour inks were for example the minium red ink and the (emerald) green ink. The minium red ink was made from lead oxide found in red sandstones. The script of the text was written freehand, by lifting the pen, with only the tip of the pen on the parchment. The script had to be perfectly regular, even when several scribes were working on the same manuscript.



Who were the scribes of the Mont Saint-Michel Scriptorium? They were well-read literate monks. Being a scribe was far from being a subordinate job. An extensive culture was necessary, as well as patience and perseverance for three to four hours a day to copy the text of a manuscript lent by another monastery. Some scribes transcribed alone several manuscripts and several hundred pages. Eleven scribes signed their work in a colophon, meaning a few lines at the end of the manuscript that mentioned their name — and sometimes a place and a date — for future generations.

Here are a few examples. *Moralia in Job* by St. Gregory the Great is a one thousand-page manuscript in thick bound volumes. The first volume (Ms 97) was transcribed by the scribe Hervard. The second volume (Ms 98) was transcribed by the scribes Martin and Gautier. Hervard probably transcribed alone at least four manuscripts (three of them still belong to the Rare Book Library of Avranches), meaning six hundred in-folio pages written on two columns. The scribe Giraud transcribed alone three manuscripts. The Homilies by St. Gregory the Great (Ms 103) were transcribed by six scribes, who were Gautier the Cantor, Hilduin, Ermenald, Osbern, Nicolas and Ecoulant. The script of this manuscript is so regular that it is impossible to distinguish the work of one scribe from the work of another scribe.

The scribe Fromond transcribed the entire manuscript gathering works by St. Jerome, St. Augustine and St. Ambrose (Ms 72). At the end of the manuscript, he wrote this beautiful five-verse rhymed colophon: “Long life to the hand that is so zealous to write so well. If someone is the scribe, you seek, reader, to know him. This is Fromond who, with zeal, wrote the book from beginning to end. What he transcribed is very considerable. He is the author of so many sacred works. Blessed is Fromond. Here is a brother we must love forever.”



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## The illuminations of the manuscripts

The scribe of a manuscript was often the illuminator too, at least during the Romanesque period. The scribe Hervard, for example, drew the initials of the manuscript he was copying, both with the black ink he was using for the text and with the minium red he was using for the first words of a section.



The first full-page painting produced by the Mont Saint-Michel Scriptorium dates back to the late tenth century. On the painting, the scribe Gelduin offers the manuscript of the *Recognitiones* (Ms 50) to St. Michael while the archangel pierces the devil with a lance. The full-page painting is the only one in the manuscript. The manuscript was the first manuscript to be produced in the scriptorium.

According to Monique Dosdat, author of *L'enluminure Romane au Mont Saint-Michel* (The Romanesque Illuminations at Mont Saint-Michel), a reference work published in 1991 (with a second edition in 2006), the most beautiful manuscripts were produced between 1050 and 1075, first with full-page paintings (prior to 1060), and then with inhabited (or historiated) initials for the ornamentation of in patristic texts (between 1060 and 1075).

The inhabited initials are a harmonious synthesis of the Merovingian zoomorphic initial and the Franco-Saxon (Carolingian) initial. The Merovingian zoomorphic initial is usually characterized by birds, fish and other animals arranged in order to form a letter. These animals often became lions, dogs and fantastic animals in the Mont Saint-Michel manuscripts. The Franco-Saxon (Carolingian) initial is usually characterized by a clear script and an ornamentation influenced by Antiquity. Interlacing was added in the legs or ends of initials in the Mont Saint-Michel manuscripts, and plant and animal patterns were gradually added over the years. Why a harmonious synthesis of both initials? Under the Insular British influence, interlacing was replaced by acanthus ornaments and by florets with elegant and varied scenery, and the fantastic animals, often reduced to their head or muzzle, spilled stems and clumps.



Unlike the spindly letters (such as the letters I or S) or the acute letters (such as the letters A or T), the round bellies of the letters O, P and Q favoured ornamentation, and the scribes invented an original type of initial, especially for the letters P and Q. The general outline of the letter P was geometric, and probably drawn with a ruler and a compass. Then were added three elements: first the interlacing from the Insular tradition, then scrollwork of acanthus leaves with fruits, and finally animated beings filling the branches. The letter Q was also ornamented with interlacing, and the slash on the Q was adorned with an animal. The elegant lines were then enhanced with rich colours.



The saints were present in the illuminations, the first one being of course St. Michael. The scribes also depicted three Church Fathers, St. Jerome, St. Ambrose and St. Augustine. St. Augustine was the most represented, first as a writer drafting his works under divine inspiration, and then in controversy scenes with the Manichean Faustus or with Felician, a believer in Arianism. A simple and clear layout delimited surfaces painted in pastel colours (pink, green or blue).

In the mid-twelfth century, when the temporal world took over the spiritual world, “masterpieces were no longer found in patristic texts; they were found in a cartulary, i.e. a collection of property titles, in chronicles and in an astronomy treaty. Law, history and science superseded theology. The Romanesque period was over.” (Monique Dosdat)

The *Cartulaire du Mont Saint-Michel*, for example, was ornamented with four full-page drawings executed in pen. The illuminated initials were different from those of earlier manuscripts. They were drawn either in black ink or in colour ink (red and blue), with an entirely new script. The graphics were new too for their decorative patterns and their

reference bestiary. The letters chosen as initials were also different, because the first page of a charter usually began with the letter I (for example *In nomine Dei summi*) or the letter E (for example *Ego Guillelmus*). The scribes of the manuscripts were not always the illuminators of the same manuscripts any more. Itinerant lay artists were sometimes hired to add the illuminations.

The late twelfth century foreshadowed the Gothic period. The illuminations were now often included in the middle of a section — and not at the beginning of a section anymore — as a way to teach the reader through images, and to give more power to the story. The style of illuminations was also changing, with inspiration brought by life in the outside world, and historiated letters containing small vivid scenes. Unlike Romanesque art, that often found its inspiration outside from reality, Gothic art was directly inspired from reality.

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## The manuscripts over time



The tenth-century Mont Saint-Michel Library fitted in a cabinet. Over the years, the library became one of the finest ecclesiastical libraries in medieval Europe, attracting both scholars and literati. It also suffered natural disasters and political vicissitudes, with fires, damaged buildings and war looting, as well as theft and carelessness. The number of 700 or 800 manuscripts given in the late Middle Ages was probably a fanciful number, unless the library was decimated by a particular misfortune during the Great Plague or the Hundred Years' War.

In the sixteenth century, the library included its first printed books, a new type of book invented in 1455 by Johannes Gutenberg, who printed his first Bible in 180 copies in Mainz, Germany.

In the seventeenth century, the library was reorganized by the Maurists (monks from the Congregation of Saint-Maur), who settled in the Mont Saint-Michel Abbey in 1622 to replace the failing Benedictine community. They wrote a catalogue describing the 280 manuscripts belonging to the abbey in October 1639. They also opened each printed book to stick the bookplate “Ex monasterio Sancti Michaelis in periculo maris” (From the monastery of St. Michael at the peril of the sea) on the first page, as an equivalent to our modern stamping. This would prove very useful in the early 21st century to find the books of the library, disseminated later on in other religious funds collected by the Rare Book Library of Avranches, in order to digitize them and create the [Virtual Mont Saint-Michel Library](#).

During the French Revolution, a decree of the Constituent Assembly in 1790 demanded the confiscation of the clergy and nobility libraries in order to create the first public funds, ancestors of the French public libraries, and religious communities were dissolved. The revolutionary authorities ordered the transfer of the Mont Saint-Michel Library (books and manuscripts) to Avranches, the main city of the department —a new territorial unit that had just been created.



In 1791, the 3,550 books of the Mont Saint-Michel Library (a number that included the 299 manuscripts) painfully journeyed in carts through the sand strands of the bay in order to be transferred to the mainland. According to one legend, some books were even crammed into barrels. All the books and manuscripts ended up in a damp hall housing the “literary deposit” confiscated from the dissolved religious communities. The “literary deposit” included not only

the Mont Saint-Michel Library but also the libraries of the Diocese of Avranches, of the Cathedral Chapter of Avranches, of the Lucerne Abbey and of the Abbey of Montmorel, as well as other smaller ecclesiastical funds. In this “literary deposit” were prevailing disorder, negligence and theft. 255 manuscripts were still recorded in 1795, and only 199 manuscripts were recorded in 1850 when the “literary deposit” moved to a more suitable place for such treasures.

After the Archaeological Society of Avranches (Société d'archéologie d'Avranches) was created in 1835 by ten notables of the city, one of them, Eugene Castillon de Saint-Victor, wrote the first catalogue of the future Heritage Fund, with a full description of its manuscripts, incunabula and printed books (bound or not).



The new City Hall of Avranches built in 1850 by François Cheftel included a beautiful hall (eighteen meters long, nine meters wide and seven meters high) on the second floor for the 14,000 books of the Heritage Fund. The rare books were lined up on the shelves from top to bottom, including on the upper shelves of the top gallery accessed by two spiral staircases. After a long waiting time that lasted sixty years, the books and manuscripts of the Mont Saint-Michel Library finally completed the difficult journey they had begun in 1791.

Printed books from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries were classified according to the Debure classification and sorted by size, with larger books on lower shelves. The larger books include the first edition (1751-72) of the *Encyclopédie* by Diderot, with its 17 volumes of text (18,000 pages and 21.7 million words) and 11 volumes of plates. Designed to collect and disseminate the entire knowledge of the time, the *Encyclopédie* was a reflection of the intellectual and social currents of the Enlightenment, with 72,000 articles written by 140 contributors (Diderot, d'Alembert, Voltaire, Rousseau, Marmontel, d'Holbach, Turgot, and others). It contributed to disseminate novel ideas that would inspire the French Revolution in 1789.

From 1924 onwards, the Mont Saint-Michel manuscripts were presented to the public in a cabinet of curiosities. During the Second World War, the manuscripts were transferred in the Castle of Ussé-Rigny, in Touraine, a quieter region in central France. Half of the city of Avranches was destroyed in July 1944 during the battles that followed the D-Day on 6 June 1944, but the books of the Rare Book Library survived, unlike the 3,000 handwritten and printed Mont Saint-Michel Archives stored in the Manche Departmental Archives (Archives Départementales de la Manche — Manche being the name of the department) in Saint-Lô. The Mont Saint-Michel Archives were entirely destroyed by fire on 6 June 1944.

The manuscripts were on display each summer in the hall of the Rare Book Library until 1963. But the conditions were not adequate, first because of the natural light pouring in through the large windows of the library, and then because of the summer temperature that, even in Normandy, was too warm for such treasures. During the three seasons when they were not displayed, the manuscripts were stored in a damp closet, like so many closets in this coastal region.

From 1963 onwards, the most beautiful manuscripts were on display each summer at the City Museum, housed in another building near the City Hall. This time, they were away from natural light, but the humidity level was still too high, and the heat from incandescent lamps was excessive.

In 1982, some mildew was apparent on a few rare books and manuscripts, and the collection went on deteriorating from saltpetre, beetles (insects) and active fungi during the following years, causing widespread concern at the local, regional and national level.



In 1986, a major renovation project was launched, first for the manuscripts, then for the rare books, and finally for the library hall itself.

The manuscripts were sent to the Versailles Annex of the French National Library (in the Paris region) to be disinfected, before being transferred to Orleans (in central France) to be filmed and photographed by the French Institute for Research and History on Texts (Institut de Recherche et d'Histoire des Textes – IRHT). Photographs were taken to provide a colour slide for each illumination and offer alternative documents for researchers, for the original manuscripts to be handled only when necessary.

A vault of sixteen square meters was built in June 1987 to receive the manuscripts on their return. The vault can hold one thousand volumes on wooden shelves, “a material capable of absorbing excess moisture, and to give it back if the documents become too dry” (Monique Dosdat). The renovated air-conditioned library hall now provided appropriate



storage conditions, meaning a temperature of eighteen degrees Celsius and a humidity level of 55%, as well as a false ceiling, indirect lighting, and anti-ultraviolet filters on the large windows. The rare books were disinfected on site and reclassified. The renovated library was inaugurated in May 1989.

From 1989 to 2005, exhibitions were organized each summer for four months, between June and September. Various events were also organized during the Heritage Days (Journées du Patrimoine) once per year in September, with the help of artists and students.

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## The Scriptorial of Avranches



In 2005, the city of Avranches launched the project of a museum on the Mont Saint-Michel manuscripts, named the Scriptorial. Housed in a new building leaning against the medieval city wall, the Scriptorial opened in August 2006. During excavations prior to the construction of the new building, a thirteenth-century cellar was found, and is now part of the museum.

Since the opening of the Scriptorial, fifteen manuscripts have been displayed in a small round hall regarded as the treasure of the museum. The manuscripts are replaced every three months, to avoid the damages from light, even if this light is subdued. The Scriptorial also chronicles the rich history of Avranches over time, with a number of objects and documents. Founded by the Celts in the 9th century BC, Avranches was a Gallo-Roman capital for three centuries, before becoming the seat of the regional bishop for many centuries, with a hiatus during the French Revolution. Avranches was also a powerful citadel after the Avranches region (named Avranchin) joined the Duchy of Normandy in 933. Avranches became a royal city after Normandy was annexed to France in 1204, before experiencing the ravages of the Hundred Years' War.



The Scriptorial offers detailed explanations on the way manuscripts were produced, including the making of parchment or vellum from sheepskin (or goatskin or calfskin), the production of inks and pigments, the trimming of goose feathers, the work of the scribes, the scripts, decoration and illumination of the manuscripts, and the binding of these manuscripts.

The Scriptorial is intended for all audiences. Children visit the museum in the company of Titivillus, an interactive imp offering explanations, games and an initiation to palaeography. Adults can leaf through digitized rare books on computer screens, and enlarge the pages of two famous manuscripts, a Bible (Ms 2) and a collection of scientific and technical texts (Ms 235). Some videos show old postcards of Mont Saint-Michel, and other rare documents such as the prints, engravings and watercolour drawings by Emile Sagot, a nineteenth-century illustrator and typographer, or the famous “Carnets” (Notebooks) by Canon Pigeon, a nineteenth-century religious historian.

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## The Rare Book Library



The Scriptorial has shed a new light on the manuscripts and the history of Mont Saint-Michel and Avranches. The conservation of the Heritage Fund also includes many other aspects: dusting and restoration of manuscripts and books, cataloguing (including for the Norman union catalogue and the French union catalogue), digitalization, organization of exhibitions, collaboration to various publications, etc.

For scholars to get direct access to the manuscripts and rare books, Jean-Luc Leservoisier, curator of the Rare Book Library (until he retired in summer 2012), opened the library twice a week — on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 10 am to 12 am — and by appointment. Every year, French and foreign scholars requested direct access to one hundred manuscripts on average.

Who were these scholars? In the City Magazine of Avranches (Bulletin Municipal d'Avranches), Jean-Luc Leservoisier explained in late 2011: “At the end of August, two Italian university professors chose Avranches as a holiday destination for them and their families. Antonio Ciaralli, a professor of palaeography in Perugia, Central Italy, and Vittorio Formentin, a specialist in Antique languages and dialects, came to the Rare Book Library to study during five days a single cover page of a thirteenth-century manuscript, in order to decipher its mysteries. They had brought a Wood’s lamp, meaning a special lamp [with ultraviolet rays] permitting to read the scripts whose ink had faded. They were able to ‘piece together’ a very rare document, the [financial] accounts written by Italian merchants from Tuscany who were pawnbrokers in Bologna, the European capital of law study in the Middle Ages. Manuscripts travelled over time, and this manuscript, produced in Bologna, arrived in Paris circa 1300, before being acquired by William of Brécé [or Brécéy, 30 kilometers from Mont Saint-Michel], who offered it to the Mont Saint-Michel Abbey, until this manuscript came to Avranches in 1791.”

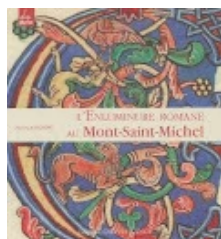
Jean-Luc Leservoisier also related another visit, the visit of Thomas Bisson, an American researcher with a Norman surname who is a professor of medieval history at Harvard. In 2011, he visited the Rare Book Library of Avranches for the third time to study the original version of *La Chronique de Robert de Torigni*, who was the Abbot of Mont Saint-Michel from 1154 to 1186, for his new translation of the twelfth-century manuscript.

The Rare Book Library is not only open to academic historians, but also to any person who is passionate about history and art, for example a local historian or a calligrapher. The general public is welcome too. Jean-Luc Leservoisier regularly organized guided tours, including for schools. To his eyes, contributing to the cultural life of the city was as important as contributing to numerous publications.

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## Some recent publications

The Mont Saint-Michel manuscripts have become an endless resource for beautiful publications, including in recent times. Here are three examples: (a) a major book on Romanesque illumination, with a first edition published in 1991, and a second edition published in 2006 by Editions Ouest-France; (b) a facsimile of the *Cartulaire du Mont Saint-Michel* published in 2005 by the Association of the Friends of Mont Saint-Michel after the restoration of the original cartulary; and (c) a multimedia publication (printed book, CD-ROM and online version) of the founding texts of Mont Saint-Michel published in 2009 by the University Press of Caen.



Monique Dosdat, archivist palaeographer, was the curator of the Heritage Fund at the City Library of Caen. She is the author of *L'Enluminure Romane au Mont Saint-Michel* (The Romanesque Illumination at Mont Saint-Michel), whose first edition was published in June 1991 by the Association of the Friends of the City Library of Avranches (Association des Amis de la Bibliothèque Municipale d'Avranches) and Editions Ouest-France, a fascinating book that I read *in extenso* before writing this article.

As mentioned on the back cover of the book: “The works of the Romanesque period are the discreet place of encounter between art and knowledge. The paintings hidden between the sheets of vellum, the well-thought page layouts organizing initials, titles and texts and harmonizing inks and colours, do not tell any story, and do not want to reveal

anything about the time and place of their creation. They deliver one message only: reading and writing are prayers. Born in the silence of a Benedictine abbey, created to be opened with reverence and kept away from profane eyes, the Mont Saint-Michel manuscripts reveal their splendour today.”

A new expanded edition with fifty additional full-page reproductions was published by Editions Ouest-France in 2006, in collaboration with Jean-Luc Leservoisier, (now former) curator of the Rare Book Library of Avranches. Jean-Luc Leservoisier is also the author of the wonderful booklet *The Mont Saint-Michel Manuscripts*. The English and French editions were both published by Editions Ouest France in 2006, with many illustrations on its thirty-two pages.



A significant step was the new edition in 2005 of the *Cartulaire du Mont Saint-Michel* (Ms 210), a collection of property titles of the abbey. Produced between 1154 and 1158 while Robert of Torigni was the Abbot of the abbey, this cartulary surpassed other contemporary cartularies because of the fine parchment used, its beautiful script in Caroline minuscule, and its rich illustrations, with many illuminated initials and four full-page drawings executed in pen. The cartulary begins with the two founding texts of Mont Saint-Michel, the *Revelatio*, relating the

vision of Aubert, bishop of Avranches, in 708, and *Introductio monachorum*, relating how Benedictine monks replaced Aubert's clerics in 966.

The cartulary was then continued for three more centuries to transcribe the charters of the new properties of the Mont Saint-Michel Abbey, but without the rich script and ornamentation of the twelfth-century pages. The cartulary is all the more important now that the handwritten Mont Saint-Michel Archives were entirely destroyed by fire on 6 June 1944 in Saint-Lô (the main city of the department), during the battles of the D-Day at the end of the Second World War.

To celebrate the restoration of the original cartulary, a [beautiful facsimile](#) was published in 2005 by the Association of the Friends of Mont Saint-Michel (Les Amis du Mont Saint-Michel). This cloth-bound volume includes 304 pages printed front and back with a four-colour process. An introduction by Emmanuel Poulle, former director of the École Nationale des Chartes, Paris, from 1988 to 1993, relates the history of the cartulary and its texts during three centuries. The two literary texts at the beginning of the cartulary were translated from Latin to French by Pierre Bouet and Olivier Desbordes, both lecturers in medieval Latin at the University of Caen, Normandy.



Published in 2009 by the University Press of Caen (Presses Universitaires de Caen) and the Scriptorial of Avranches, *Les Manuscrits du Mont Saint-Michel: Textes Fondateurs* (The Mont Saint-Michel Manuscripts: Founding Texts) gathers all the medieval sources on the origins of the Mont Saint-Michel Abbey. As a critical edition of these texts with original texts, translations and a philological and historical commentary, this publication sheds a new light on the history and historiography of the abbey, and also highlights the richness of the Heritage Fund of Avranches. The publication includes a two-volume printed book and a CD-ROM, as well as a free online edition for

these medieval sources to be available to everyone. The project was funded by a Project Contract between the French State and the Normandy region in 2007-13 (Contrat de Projet Etat-Region 2007-2013), with the help of the Regional Centre for Literature in Lower Normandy (Centre Régional des Lettres de Basse-Normandie).

The first volume, entitled *Chroniques Latines du Mont Saint-Michel* (Latin Chronicles of Mont Saint-Michel), was edited by Pierre Bouet and Olivier Desbordes. The corpus of Latin texts with translations and commentaries includes two major texts. The first text is *Revelatio ecclesiae sancti Michaelis Archangeli in Monte Tumba*, a ninth-century text relating the foundation of the first sanctuary by Aubert in 708. The second text is *De miraculis in Monte sancti Michaelis patris*, an eleventh-century work including three accounts: (a) *Introductio monachorum*, relating how Richard I, Duke of Normandy, sent off Benedictine monks to Mont Saint-Michel in 966; (b) *De translatione and miraculis beati Autberti*, relating how bishop Aubert's bones and perforated skull were discovered; and (c) *Miracula Sancti Michaelis*, relating the prodigies attributed to St. Michael from the origins of the abbey until 1050. The annex of the publication offers two other documents: *Liber de apparitione* on Mont Gargan and *De scuto and gladio* by Baudri de Dol. In the free online edition, the digitized original texts and their translations by Pierre Bouet and Olivier Desbordes are displayed face-to-face on the screen.

The second volume, entitled *Le Roman du Mont Saint-Michel de Guillaume de Saint-Pair* (The History of Mont Saint-Michel by William of Saint-Pair), was edited by Catherine Bougy, lecturer in medieval French at the University of Caen. The original manuscript includes three parts. It was written circa 1170 by William of Saint-Pair, a young monk of the abbey who was a native from Saint-Pair-en-Cotentin (around 50 kilometers north of Mont Saint-Michel) and a contemporary of Robert of Torigni, Abbot of Mont Saint-Michel at the time. The original manuscript (Ms 10289) now belongs to the British Library.

The manuscript is a long octosyllabic poem of 3,781 verses, with a fragment missing at the end. Its three parts are: (a) the building of an oratory on Mont Tombe in 708 by Aubert, Bishop of Avranches; (b) the settling down of Benedictine monks in 966 on the orders of Richard I, Duke of Normandy; and (c) the several miracles accomplished by St. Michael. A talented poet and storyteller, William of Saint-Pair wrote in Old French, in a clear style peppered with Norman words. He passionately defended the independence of his religious community against the power of Henry II Plantagenet, Duke of Normandy and King of England. Over the centuries, the monks of the Mont Saint-Michel Abbey would always struggle to remain independent from political power, and William of Saint-Pair was one of them.

His account was the first account written in French by a monk of the Mont Saint-Michel Abbey, and made the history of the abbey accessible to pilgrims who did not know Latin. More than eight centuries later, the free online edition fulfils the author's wishes at the digital age, with the translated texts facing the digitized original texts, a brief presentation (a summarized introduction of the printed edition), many notes and an interactive glossary.

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## The manuscripts at the digital age



The digitization of the Mont Saint-Michel manuscripts was a step-by-step project. Before being digitized, the manuscripts were microfilmed and photographed by the French Institute for Research and History on Texts (Institut de Recherche et d'Histoire des Textes – IRHT). They were microfilmed first, which a copy of the microfilm sent on request. They were photographed then, with a collection of 800 colour slides (24 x 36 mm) for all illuminated manuscripts.

Photograph negatives and their prints, classified in chronological order and by scriptorium, were also available in Avranches.

Fifty manuscripts (texts and illuminations) were digitized in 2005 prior to the opening of the Scriptorial. Seventy-one manuscripts were then digitized and microfilmed from 2005 to 2010. Jean-Luc Leservoisier, curator of the Rare Books Library of Avranches at the time, explained in 2010 in a paper for the Regional Directorate for Cultural Affairs (Direction Régionale des Affaires Culturelles – DRAC): “Forty-nine Mont Saint-Michel manuscripts considered as priority were digitized before the opening of the Scriptorial, as well as a manuscript named *Le Livre Vert, Cartulaire de l'Église d'Avranches* (The Green Book, Cartulary of the Church of Avranches), i.e. a total of fifty manuscripts (18,509 pages) digitized in image mode with a resolution of 300 DPI. In December 2008 and January 2009, seventy-one more manuscripts were digitized by the IRHT, as part of its microfilming and digitization project of the manuscripts of Lower Normandy. (...)”

The priority was given to (a) manuscripts relating to Mont Saint-Michel itself, i.e. the accounts of its foundation, its history in general, and its liturgical traditions (missals, books for religious services); (b) the productions of the monastic scriptorium highlighted in the research project led by François Avril and Jonathan Alexander, among others, and estimated at about seventy manuscripts; and (c) the main manuscripts used at Mont Saint-Michel for study, for example Aristotle, Boethius and Cicero for Antique works. The Heritage Fund of Avranches is certainly one of the most

studied, best known and best publicized rare funds in France (with TV and radio shows, etc.). The ‘dematerialization’ of the manuscripts, as a result of digitization, allows researchers to work in their university or their home, and the Scriptorial can send them the images [for a fee] on a CD or by email.”



The illuminations of the manuscripts were digitized while bearing in mind the museum spaces of the Scriptorial. As explained by Jean-Luc Leservoisier: “The illuminations of the manuscripts have already been digitized during a former digitization campaign, meaning 830 images (inhabited initials, historiated initials, border ornaments) scanned this time in 600 DPI, and some of them even in 1,200 DPI for the exhibit signage of the museum and the large promotional

images of the Scriptorial. We can see these images in the wall friezes, combined with texts and graphics, to offer museum paths that are both fun and educational. (...) To illustrate the difficult topic of the content of these manuscripts, and to avoid the usual facsimiles of pages of manuscripts, our choice — not planned from the start — became a corpus of images scrolling across a large screen, with the possibility for visitors to ‘catch’ them and enlarge them. This ‘image wall’ includes 700 digitized images grouped into eight themes. It was created by the company Art and Graphic Heritage (Art et Patrimoine Graphique) and the Image Institute (Institut de l’Image) of Chalon-sur-Saône [a city in eastern France]. This is a great educational tool and a source of wonder for our visitors.”

The digitized images of the illuminations were also used to create postcards, bookmarks and other objects that are now sold in the Scriptorial bookstore. These images are also requested by many publishers. Commercial publishers pay image rights to re-use the images in their own publications. Requests for non-commercial use are considered on a case-by-case basis, for permission and payment of a fee (or not). The Scriptorial also sends on request a CD-ROM (for a fee) holding all the digitized manuscripts.

Since 2015, the Mont Saint-Michel manuscripts have had their own virtual library (select “Avranches”) within the French Virtual Library of Medieval Manuscripts (Bibliothèque Virtuelle des Manuscrits Médiévaux – BMVV).

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## The Virtual Mont Saint-Michel Library



The final stage of this large project was the Virtual Mont Saint-Michel Library (Bibliothèque Virtuelle du Mont Saint-Michel), meaning the digital reconstitution of the Mont Saint-Michel Library like it was in 1791 before being transferred to Avranches. This project was launched in October 2011 by Pierre Bouet, former lecturer of medieval Latin at the University of Caen.

Jean-Luc Leservoisier explained in 2010 in his paper for the DRAC: “As part of the retrospective conversion of the catalogue of the Rare Book Library of Avranches, a project supported by the Regional Centre for Literature (Centre Régional des Lettres), we have been able to open all the books since three years, with the help of students from the University of Caen. We have identified 1,267 books from the Mont Saint-Michel Abbey, dispersed on the shelves, thanks to their famous bookplate “Ex monasterio sancti Michaelis in periculo maris” (From the monastery of St. Michael at the peril of the sea).”

Jean-Luc Leservoisier added two years later, in April 2012: “The project of a Virtual Library of the Mont Saint-Michel Abbey, led by the University of Caen and the City of Avranches, and supported by the French Ministry of Culture, has just started this year. This should be a three-year project, with a scientific description of all the Mont Saint-Michel manuscripts preserved in Avranches and elsewhere, as well as a description of all 1,255 surviving printed books, without counting the lost printed books that could be replaced with their digital version. All these documents will be freely available to the general public through an ambitious distance learning programme developed by the IT team of



the University of Caen.” To this intent, a group of students came back to the Rare Book Library of Avranches for six weeks in April and May 2012. The project was launched five years later, in April 2017, as the [Virtual Library of Mont Saint-Michel](#) (Bibliothèque Virtuelle du Mont Saint-Michel).

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Please see also [other articles and books](#) on medieval art.

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